

## The real value of home rule

In my three years working for Governor Haley Barbour, I have visited many school districts across Mississippi. I've always admired the fact that certain school districts as racially and economically diverse as, for example, Pontotoc can achieve superior academic achievement while others with similar demographics continue to dwell in mediocrity or less. More than anything else, this remarkable accomplishment can be attributed to one common variable: resourceful local leadership.

That is why I found the July 5, 2006, Clarion-Ledger article ("School officials on home rule: So what?") so disappointing. In it, the suggestion is made that the recent success in creating home rule for schools is irrelevant to district operations. I have found local superintendents to be among the hardest working, most dedicated people in state government. Unfortunately, the policy driven nature of education has led many administrators to disregard the kind of paradigmatic, innovative shifts in thinking other states employ to move and improve student achievement in favor of simply following the standard operating procedures.

Although school leaders have asked for home rule legislation for many years, it is difficult to blame superintendents for not wanting to cut flips over it. Under long standing attorney generals' opinions, school districts have had to seek legislation for permission to act. In his State of the State, the Governor mentioned Gulfport's 1994 failed attempt to get revenue interruption insurance on casino revenue in the event of a hurricane. As a result of these opinions, which correctly stated the law at that time, districts have had to seek legislation and Title 37 of the Mississippi Code has grown exponentially over the years. In order to keep up, the Mississippi Department of Education has had to initiate regulations requiring further bureaucracy at the local level for implementation and compliance. Such a network creates environments far less conducive to the type of creative educational leadership to increase student achievement that is possible with home rule.

The Governor has often said that no one in Jackson knows how to run schools more effectively than local leaders, but that is exactly what was required before home rule. In seeking permissive legislation, enormous amounts of limited time and resources from local districts, the Mississippi

Department of Education, and the Legislature were expended as hundreds of educationally related bills are introduced every year.

Two examples of permissive legislation that impact southwest Mississippi are indicative of the true value of home rule. Rep. David Myers (D-McComb) was unsuccessful in his efforts to get out of committee a bill that would give his local school board the authority to develop local critical needs scholarships for teachers. A proposal that did eventually become law was submitted by Rep. Sam Mims (R-McComb). This law grants specific permission for his school board to sell its own property to Southwest Mississippi Community College. Home rule allows both of these to happen immediately and without going to Jackson for permission.

So in answer to the “so what” question, the relevance of home rule is immense. Today’s world moves quickly, and we need to organize our educational infrastructure in a way that can respond in like manner. Local citizens can become more engaged in the process with reasonable expectations of short term foreseeable outcomes. The propensity for bureaucracy to expand is diminished as local educational leaders become more responsive in addressing critical concerns without having “the process” to blame.

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July 5, 2006

School officials on home rule: So what?

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